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THE BUILDER,

NO. XXVII.

SATURDAY, AUGUST 12, 1843.

FOUR destructive fires took place in this metropolis within the twenty-four hours included between Saturday and Sunday morning last, and a fifth was recorded on Monday morning. The loss to the Insurance offices is of a serious nature, and ruinous to the individuals whose property was involved in the fires. Our ears have been literally stunned with the frequency and appalling nature of these reports. Liverpool and Manchester have been almost proscribed as to protection,—by the fire-offices acting on the defensive, and raising their premiums; the fire-offices have been shaken, literally shaken—one has given way—the premiums in London are being advanced; and knowing what we do of the inevitable consequence of the constant drain on the fire-insurance funds, we are enabled to predict as for a certainty, that other serious and mischievous effects must follow; public and private involvement, and a good deal of public and private ruin will be the certain consequence of any longer delay of measures of security and of fire prevention.

Yes, fire prevention, not fire cure, must be the principle, and it must be acted upon promptly and speedily.

We are no alarmists, but, on the contrary, we speak in full confidence, as having a clear view of the danger, and as clear a view of the remedy. That danger, however, there is, and danger of an extreme kind, imminent, perilous, awful; we are warranted in using the strongest terms—there is, we repeat it, an awful danger impending over us, and it is necessary to convince ourselves of it before we can be induced to apply seriously in search of, or to consider the remedy.

Last Sunday morning, before one fire was out, the alarm was raised in another quarter, and a draft of engines and half-exhausted men was made from the former fire to suppress the latter; had there been three or four fires all at the same time—a not improbable contingency, and added to these, a deficiency in the supply of water—and these fires, or but one of them, in a crowded rotten quarter of the city—among inflammable materials and buildings—we ask, in such a contingency what security have we against a second "Fire of London?" Do we rely, or dare we rely, upon the efficiency of our engines, or our fire-brigade? Do we plume ourselves upon the supply of water from the Thames, or from sources of higher site? Are our buildings so constructed, our streets so wide and well-disposed, the vigilance and care of our people, such as to give warranty of greater security than on former occasions, or in other countries and districts? Is this coal-consuming, smoke-dried, and gas-stoved city less at hazard than in times of niggard or necessitous economy in the matter of firing and lighting? Is the "touch-wood" of our older fabrics, or the lath and plaster quartering partitions of our newest ones, a reliance? Is the modern manufacture of Manchester and Glasgow, the "tinder" of cottons and muslins, to be set against or be held superior to the linens and "huckabacks" of a century and a half back? In fine, is the crowded and accumulated London of this day, with its constant record of fires, and this sketched out summary of risks, in a position to claim immunity over the lesser London of 1666? Say rather, is it not in all or most respects at the greater hazard—and say whether the late terrific instance of the conflagration of a neighbouring city—with all these "messenger" or portent fires of our own—say whether these are not to be regarded as warnings—as the dread symptoms of a lurking danger, which, if not averted by timely remedial measures, will work its ravages on a scale that shall at once mock at our folly, our blindness, our deafness, our dulness, our heedlessness, and at all former records of devastation, whether of fire or flood.

It is now but little more than a twelve-month since Hamburgh was *gutted out* by a four days' fire, and look how it was circumstanced to compete against or withstand such a catastrophe. Lying at its feet, and coursing along its very streets, are the waters of the Elbe; above, and yet within the city one might say, at least within the suburbs, is a perfect lake of waters those of the greater and the lesser Alsters, the overflow from which joins with the *canal streets* that alternate as it were with those for carriage traffic. Fires had had their frequency, sufficiently so to awaken the vigilance of the inhabitants, and inspire them to take all the precaution of their "watch and ward," their fire engines, and well-appointed fire police. The whole town was assessed, as it were, to a "fire fund," out of which previous sufferers had received their due compensation; all curative, and, as they considered, all the necessary preventive measures and policies were in action. They had every confidence in the well-trained and hitherto successful fire-suppression force, and when on Palm Sunday morning (we think it was) of last year, or about the midnight of Saturday, a fire broke out in some slop or rag shop of a little "*Wapping*" or "*Field-lane*" of Hamburgh, when it spread from the house of its origin to two or three houses, and even at 10 o'clock in the day, when it had well-nigh embraced a whole street, people passed to and fro to church, and pursued their usual avocations, thinking much of the "large fire," but nothing of the insufficiency of their powers to arrest it. We need not dwell upon the sequel, the calamitous sequel; it is summed up in this, that in four days the heart of the city was a blazing ruin, and ruined were hundreds and thousands of its inhabitants. The "fire fund" was bankrupt, and the sympathies and generosities of Europe were hard, though voluntarily and nobly, taxed, to make good the pecuniary deprivations of the sorely afflicted people of that once apparently secure and well-favoured city.

There was something said at the time among our neighbours across the channel of a resolution to put Paris in a state of defence against such an emergency, from which, while the sensations which the Hamburgh fire had excited were fresh, it was thought she was not more than ordinarily secure; but that fitful or wakeful anxiety appears now to have passed off—to be renewed again only upon a second warning, if such should not knock at and knock down their own doors. Here in England it hardly seemed to excite a thought of any jeopardy in which we ourselves might stand. We looked on in a sort of gaping awe and wonderment, paid and pitied our full quota; cared little and thought less about the cause, and least of all dreamed, nor do we yet dream of the cause or consequence of the like to ourselves. But we take upon us to aver that never people in the world have or have had more right to read the lesson as one specially indited for our warning and instruction. Where Hamburgh had one element of danger we have at least two. Where Hamburgh now has her gain to reap, to extract good out of gaunt adversity, we have the adversity much of our own choosing—we have the turning of the tables, and all for profit, if we so elect.

We have had great talk of a new Metropolitan Building Act, and are well familiarized with the precaution of stout party-walls. Fortunately, the Act is deferred for a session; we hope that it may embrace something more, and that in the interval no greater cause may arise to enlighten us on the subject of farther fire-preventive regulations. We throw in our mite of counsel meanwhile, importuning nevertheless in the same breath, that a good look-out be kept during the ensuing winter upon the irremediable and irremoveable causes of risk, causes at least which we must endure for a time. Let double watch be instituted, and extraordinary precautions—we are sure it will pay—and along with them, let the following plan, or some such plan, for such object, be taken in hand, matured, and prosecuted.

To think of rebuilding London on a fire-proof plan would be an absurdity, but we think it may be shewn how largely or how nearly we may approximate to some such plan without stepping beyond the bounds of a practicable and intelligible purpose. Let fire-proof blocks, or compartments of buildings, be set up at intervals in certain streets, and the danger may be greatly diminished, and gradually all but removed. What we mean by a "fire-proof block," is a house, say at first every tenth house in a street, and ultimately every fifth house, built upon an approved fire-proof model, which will interpose itself to the spread or communication of fire to houses on its opposite sides. If every fifth house were of this class, and provided with a large cistern of water at the top, the four intervening houses would be under the play of hose or water-pipes from the cisterns, and might be inundated without the aid of engines or the labour of firemen. As to the supply of water, we shall speak presently.

At first we would suggest to begin in the more dangerous and crowded districts of London. A commission should be instituted, whose province it would be to search into and report upon such districts, and to mark out the sites of the "fire-proof blocks." In all cases of rebuilding, the proprietors or builders would be required, as at present, to give notice to the district surveyor of their intention, and the surveyor should apprize the commissioners, who, having powers, would confer with the proprietor or builder, and arrange whether such house and such an opportunity were to be used as an occasion for erecting a fire-proof one, awarding compensation or providing the means for the extras in a fire-proof construction. Buildings are taken down every day, as thousands more ought to be, or be indicted, which a judicious arrangement would adapt to favour this plan; there could be no tyranny in it—no case should be, nor in a properly-constituted commission could be, improperly forced forward—the public safety, however, would even justify a little apparent

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